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ABSTRACT

This paper serves two purposes: (1) it outlines some of the conflicting characterizations of the differences among scientific and artistic approaches to qualitative research; and (2) it provides some illustrations from conceptual and empirical research to demonstrate that these are indeed differences that matter. The following four ways in which artistic and scientific approaches are different are discussed: (1) the language of disclosure in an artistic study is one where form and content are complementary, whereas in social science the language is value-free and dispassionate; (2) goals of scientific research are to advance scientific information, while in an artistic inquiry the goal is to improve educational practices; (3) the perspective in artistic research is normative and descriptive, while scientific studies focus on appraisal; (4) ethical difficulties, which are unlikely to occur in scientific approaches, are encountered often in artistic practices. The conclusions are made that artistic and scientific approaches serve somewhat different purposes and provide various perspectives and that artistic approaches are an important complement to the existing ways of seeing the educational world. (JAZ)

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DIFFERENCES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE: THE ARTISTIC VERSUS THE SCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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It may seem an oddity that the scientific versus the artistic remains a "perennial issue in qualitative research." After all, there have been several well-known and worthy attempts in recent years to explicate the nature of artistic and scientific approaches (e.g. House, 1979; Eisner, 1981). Yet there remains considerable disagreement, perhaps even confusion, regarding the extent to which the two approaches are similar or different.

My aim in this paper is twofold. First, I shall briefly outline some of the conflicting characterizations of the differences among scientific and artistic approaches to qualitative research. Second, I shall provide some illustrations from conceptual and empirical research that demonstrate that these are indeed differences that make a difference. Let me say at the outset, though, that these differences are often more of degree than of kind. While my intention is to provide contrasts, this should not obscure that artistic and scientific approaches to qualitative research have a great deal in common (e.g. an emphasis on meaning in context, and a commitment to "thick description").

This paper was presented as part of a symposium entitled "Perennial Issues in Qualitative Research" at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco. April 1986. I gratefully acknowledge David Flinders' insightful criticisms of an earlier draft.

There is a wide range of views concerning the differences among scientific and artistic approaches to qualitative research. At one extreme, is the view there are no significant differences, or at least no substantive differences. Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman have argued this view. Discussing one prominent artistic approach, educational connoisseurship and educational criticism, Miles and Huberman write:

a close look at the actual practice of educational criticism and connoisseurship suggests that it is not a question of an "artist's" giving shape to seamless, inchoate material, but of an intense observer's scrupulous recording of naturally-occurring social interactions from which patterns are inferred and interpreted by many of the same algorithms that inductivist researchers use in a more clearly defined, logical empiricist paradigm (1984A:20-21).

Thus, for Miles and Huberman, the artistic inquirer is engaged in essentially the same methods of data gathering as his or her scientific counterpart. As for data interpretation, Miles and Huberman disclaim that there are artistic ways of "knowing" (Eisner, 1985A). Such ways of knowing are dismissed as "the somewhat magical approach in the analysis of qualitative data" (Miles and Huberman, 1984B:20).

A more widely-shared view is that of Frederick Erickson (1986). He argues that there are a variety of "qualitative" approaches: "ethnographic, qualitative, participant observational, case study, symbolic interactionist, phenomenological, constructivist, or interpretive" (1986:119). Erickson continues: "These approaches are all slightly different, but each bears strong family resemblance to the other [emphasis added]" (1986:119).

For Erickson, the similarities among qualitative approaches overshadow their differences. Nevertheless, I think it significant that Erickson's (1986) recent review of qualitative research on teaching dwells almost exclusively on studies conducted in the scientific paradigm. This is also the case with other reviews of

qualitative research. Jane White's recent review of qualitative research in social studies education provides an example (White, 1985). Although White acknowledges the existence of artistic approaches, she only reviews studies which fall within the scientific tradition.

A third characterization of scientific and artistic approaches is provided by Elliot Eisner (1981). In his view, the two approaches significantly differ. Specifically, Eisner identifies ten differences that he claims separate the conduct and outcomes of research in each approach. (1) Eisner argues against methodological monism. He states:

Each approach [the scientific and the artistic] has its own unique perspective to provide... The issue is ... how one approaches the educational world. It is to the artistic to which we must turn, not as a rejection of the scientific, but because with both we can achieve binocular vision (1981:9).

A final view of scientific/artistic differences is provided by one of the best-known "artistic" studies of schooling, The Good High School (1983) by Sara Lawrence Lightfoot. Lightfoot's work involves the creation of school "portraits." Her epistemological commitment, however, remains ambivalent. She believes that school portraiture can lead educators to "see" much they had previously neglected — a view, of course, that owes much to Eisner. Nevertheless, Lightfoot describes herself as a "social scientist" (e.g. 1983:14), and believes that portraiture is a creative pursuit rather than "pure" (1983:14) or "disciplined" (1983:13) research. In this view, artistic approaches serve as a preliminary to "real" research, or serve exhortative purposes.

Thus far, I have identified four conflicting views of artistic/scientific differences. In the remainder of this paper I want to show that these scientific/artistic differences are not mere abstract musings, but rather that they have a tangible presence in the literature of educational research. Although these differences may be important for their own sake, my purpose in identifying them is

to consider how they actually influence the conduct of qualitative inquiry. No attempt is made to provide an exhaustive list of the differences which distinguish scientific and artistic approaches. Instead, I shall explicate and illustrate four primary differences which appear to be widely misunderstood.

The first area of difference is in the language of disclosure. Differences in this area may be obvious, yet they have created some misunderstanding. This misunderstanding stems, I believe, from confusion of a what is necessary in a given research mode, and what is possible in that mode. In artistic modes, the language of disclosure is necessarily one where form and content are complementary. This is possible in scientific approaches, but not necessary. There is no reason why scientific inquirers cannot employ, say, metaphors or figurative language in order to persuade -- indeed, they often do (see House, 1979). But there is no imperative (and often disincentives) for the scientific researcher to do so. Although more honored in the breach than in practice, the language of social science aspires to be value-free and dispassionate. Rather than by form, the discourse of science aims to persuade by logic (House, 1979:5).

In artistic approaches, form and content are ideally one. The artistic researcher exploits the potentialities of language (Eisner, 1985B:224-229). Of course, the artistic researcher does not necessarily use only figurative language -- just as his or her scientific counterpart is unlikely to use only discursive writing. Nonetheless, as Thomas Barone has observed, the artistic inquirer's rendering of educational life, "would contain metaphorical, artful language to evoke a qualitative sense of the 'wholeness of experience'..." (1980:33).

The goals of the research are a second way in which artistic and scientific approaches differ. While it is far from settled if social science is, or can be, "scientific" (Phillips, 1985), it remains that social scientists and artistic inquirers often hold quite different aspirations for their work. Social scientists

often claim as their professional priority the advancement of a corpus of scientific knowledge (Lessnoff, 1974:11). The artistic inquirer, on the other hand, is not committed to the advancement of disciplinary knowledge but to the improvement of educational practice. Although social scientists are often concerned with educational improvement, and can make recommendations for change, there is no professional necessity that they do so.

Two studies should illustrate this difference in professional goals: Alan Peshkin's Growing Up American (1978) and Barone's "Things of Use and Things of Beauty" (1983). Both studies examine schooling in small, rural communities. Both are concerned with the effects of schooling on the young, and its consequences for society. While the two studies are not entirely parallel, they serve well to illustrate differences in professional mission.

Peshkin's ethnography of the Mansfield community and its high school examines how the school transmits the community's culture. This focus is anthropological rather than educational. For example,⁸ Peshkin observes that the school's provincial curriculum is "maintained at the cost of compromising some national ideals" (1978:201) such as racial tolerance and free access to information. Further, Mansfield High's curriculum does little to foster "intellectual development" (1978:200). "Even capable students fail to perceive value in the more abstract aspects of education" (1978:179). Nevertheless, the school is highly successful in perpetuating the cultural values of the community. Peshkin concludes: "For better or for worse the school serves those whose views dominate. And like a good shoe, Mansfield High School fits mainstream Mansfield" (1978:205).

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that Peshkin, as good ethnographers should, provides sufficient information that readers can reach a different conclusion from his own. Nevertheless his conclusions underscore that his primary, scholarly commitment is to anthropology, not to education.

I would suggest that an educational criticism of Mansfield High's curriculum would have an entirely different center of gravity. It would include, for example, consideration of the consequences of the school's impoverished curriculum for the youngsters' educational growth. Similarly, Barone's aforementioned study of the Swain County Arts program focuses on the educational significance of the curriculum he examines. For instance, Barone discusses the art teacher, the school, student life and learning, and state curriculum requirements. He considers the tension between art students producing the useful and the beautiful. Along the way, much is also revealed of the community's culture, but it is secondary. This information is used to explain the nature of the educational program rather than vice versa. Ethnographers (or other social scientists) in a school setting may choose to focus on the educational significance of what ensues, but they have no professional obligation to do so.

This difference in goals or purposes raises my third (and closely related) point. As implied above, Barone and other artistic inquirers are in the business of making educational judgments. Educational critics are simply not interested in describing an educational setting for its own sake. Examination of, say, classroom discourse or patterns of student interaction are means to the end of assessing educational worth and suggesting forms and methods of improvement. These are normative pursuits. As Barone puts it, his study examines: "...the educational meaning and significance of the program's outcomes -- the character of its impact on the lives of these students" (1983:11).

Anthropologists such as Harry Wolcott have drawn a distinction between doing ethnography and assessing educational worth. His book, The Man in the Principal's Office (1973), took as a "focus" the "study of the professional life of a school administrator" (1982:72). While no one would deny that inevitably all social inquiry is value-laden, Wolcott later wrote of his book:

My editors pressed for additional commentary that would help the intended educator audience not only to recognize their [principals'] problems but to see some possible remedies. Eventually I squeezed out an "Epilogue" of ten additional pages, carefully warning the reader that I felt caught between my ethnographic commitment to describe rather than to judge and my responsibility as a fellow educator to offer any help or suggestions that seemed warranted [emphasis added] (1982:74).

In artistic approaches, the normative factor serves as an organizing principle of the study. Let me suggest three examples. Lightfoot's The Good High School (1983) focuses on the notion of "goodness" in schools: What constitutes educational "goodness" is a normative notion, not a scientific one (1983:23). Similarly, Barone's study (1983) of the Swain County Arts program is concerned with judging the educational effects of the tension between "things of use" and "things of beauty." And in my own work, Thornton (1985), examining curriculum consonance — the educational effects of the relationships between teachers' plans, classroom events, and what students take away — I focused on appraising the educational significance of consonance, not just describing its incidence. Scientific studies of consonance, such as the work of Jere Brophy (1982), lack this normative dimension.

Where the three distinctions I have drawn so far are methodological or epistemological, the fourth and final distinction is ethical. Artistic approaches often raise special ethical difficulties that are unlikely to occur, or at least be as acute, in scientific approaches. These special ethical difficulties in artistic approaches such as connoisseurship/criticism arise from a variety of sources. Many of these sources are also present in ethnographic research: What constitutes "informed consent" from participants when research outcomes are "emergent"? How does one report "objectively" on informants who have become closely familiar? Nevertheless, I want to argue that ethical problems in artistic approaches can be significantly different from those in ethnography. This is partly because the ethnographer usually is not concerned with judging the worth of what is being

studied. It makes no sense, for instance, to ask if Peshkin's portrayal of cultural transmission in Mansfield is educationally-appropriate. He is concerned with describing what is, not trying to point to what ought to be. Usually the scientist's aspiration is to get the story right; let the "facts" speak for themselves.

When ethnographers do move into the realm of making normative judgments, they move closer to the ethical problems that often arise in the conduct of educational criticism. George Spindler's work on "Roger Harker" (1982) offers an example. Spindler, acting as an educational consultant, found that Harker, a classroom teacher, consistently, albeit unintentionally, favored his Anglo students over his minority students. Harker, at first, denied Spindler's claim. Eventually the teacher was persuaded that he needed to change his behavior if his students were to receive equitable treatment. The Harker case raises ethical issues which hold particular relevance to artistic approaches to educational research. How should the researcher balance the interests of harm to the teacher (e.g. reporting his inequitable practices) and the interest of the students? I want to suggest that a commitment to changing classroom life is likely to create significant ethical problems.

In the conduct of educational criticism ethical difficulties are likely to be further exacerbated. As Nel Noddings has observed, a critic's vivid renderings of classroom life can be boldly negative (see Noddings, 1986). Moreover, the critic, more than the ethnographer, is likely to enter into a close, even collegial, relationship with teachers.

Compared with the ethnographer, the critic's role more often resembles that of an educational consultant. In part, the critic's mandate is practical -- he or she is not in the classroom to advance the corpus of scientific knowledge, but to suggest improvements. Moreover, the critic's connoisseurship skills normally

include experience as a classroom teacher. This readily leads to considerable sharing of ideas, even empathy, between researcher and informant. Plainly, informants are particularly vulnerable. In these undistanced circumstances of close informality, the critic's judgment can easily do harm to a teacher's self-concept, and even to a teacher's professional advancement. Even in cases of studying self-confident and exemplary teachers, schools and programs, Lightfoot conceded that her reports were received with "great trepidation" (1983:373) by school people. What can be expected in circumstances where educational virtue cannot be counted on? Would Lightfoot's ethical stance have been different if she had been studying the "bad" high school?

The evaluative orientation of educational criticism exacerbates the ethical problems of qualitative research. The critic is in a double-bind regarding reporting his or her findings. After I had written my study of curriculum consonance (1985), for instance, I sought to find out from teachers if my report rang true: "Is this description what your classroom is like?". Certainly this was necessary before I could ask: "Are the criticisms apt and useful?" The potential for harm to the teachers I studied was plain: Blunt negativism was likely to be hurtful (personally and professionally), and thus not only unhelpful but also unethical. Yet, as a researcher I also had another ethical concern -- to render an accurate version of what I saw.

In other writing (Thornton, 1986), I have explored the ethical problems of educational criticism more fully. For now, suffice it to say that educational criticism is an enterprise where it seems reasonable to expect ethical problems. The existing canons of ethics, even those derived from scientific qualitative methodologies, are inadequate for dealing with problems in artistic approaches to qualitative inquiry.

In summary, I have argued that there are conflicting views of the degree to which scientific and artistic approaches to qualitative research differ. I then identified four ways in which the research path taken -- the scientific or the artistic -- significantly influences the aims, conduct, and outcomes of the research project.

Before closing, let me reiterate the theme of this symposium: "Perennial issues in qualitative research." Despite the growing legitimacy of qualitative research and evaluation methods in recent years, there remains considerable disagreement about their nature (see Smith and Heshusius, 1986), particularly the nature of artistic methods. It may be that artistic methods will have to wage the same long struggle for acceptance that their scientific counterparts did. Methodological pluralism rarely finds ready acceptance from adherents of existing research traditions. But I think it significant that the growing body of artistic studies demonstrate that artistic methods offer an illuminating approach to educational inquiry. Artistic approaches and scientific approaches serve somewhat different purposes, and provide different perspectives. In this sense, artistic approaches are an important complement to our existing ways of seeing the educational world.

Endnote

- (1) Eisner (1981) suggests the following ten distinctions among scientific and artistic approaches: (1) The forms of representation employed; (2) The criteria for appraisal; (3) Points of focus; (4) The nature of generalization; (5) The role of form; (6) Degree of license allowed; (7) Interest in prediction and control; (8) The sources of data; (9) The basis of knowing; and (10) Ultimate aims.

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